

Viewpoint

Answering President Obama's Call for Mentoring: It's Not Just for Mentees Anymore

Subhead blurb to come...

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Introduction

President Obama and the first lady declared January 2010 as National Mentoring Month, highlighting the power of mentoring and its impact on youth. As scholars involved in the research on and practice of mentoring, we laud this proclamation as commendable. While some may eschew developmental relationships and believe them to be unnecessary if one has enough drive, ambition, and skill, mentoring is often touted as a critical component in educational, professional, and personal success. It has been the topic of countless books both inside and outside academe. In January 2011, *Inside Higher Ed* reported on a panel at the American Historical Association, noting that mentoring work was “highly effective for students and immensely satisfying for professors” (Berrett 2011, ¶ 1). The article highlighted the importance of mentoring to student development and cited the unfortunate tendency of faculty committees to give little consideration to this form of academic service in making decisions about promotion and tenure. Looking beyond college and university campuses, programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the national network of Mentoring Partnerships, and MentorNet offer protégés the opportunity to locate individuals who can offer them support and guidance.

While the benefits of being someone's protégé are well documented, we were especially excited to hear the president speak about the benefits of serving as a mentor. Discussions of mentoring usually center on how mentees

in developmental relationships benefit, linking these relationships to better academic outcomes, a sense of engagement with the organization, and, of course, key opportunities for advancement. Recently, however, researchers have begun to explore another facet of mentorship, revealing the truth behind President Obama's words: "The mentor usually gets as much, or more out of [mentorship] than the mentee" (Obama, Saldana, and Obama 2010, ¶ 32).

Consonant with this revelation, this article reports our exploration of the benefits that can accrue to mentors participating in developmental relationships. Specifically, we share narratives collected in a study of mentors participating in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate School Internship at The University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin). Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) is a philosophy of education derived from classical rhetorical theories that provides an intellectual platform for instigating learning across disciplinary boundaries and generating collaborations between the academy and society. IE harnesses the core philosophies of Western education in transforming the master-apprentice-entitlement paradigm into one of discovery, ownership, accountability, collaboration, and action. IE aims to educate and nurture "citizen-scholars" by leveraging knowledge assets contained within universities, empowering faculty and students to become agents of change.

IE has garnered a great deal of attention and many accolades—featured in nearly 200 articles; named the top Example of Excelencia at the graduate level by Excelencia in Education (an organization that works to accelerate success in higher education for Latina/o students); and hailed by educational leaders as an innovative, groundbreaking philosophy that facilitates broader participation in society, including endorsements by university presidents such as Mark Yudof (University of California), E. Gordon Gee (The Ohio State University), Nancy Cantor (Syracuse University), Mary Sue Coleman (University of Michigan), Holden Thorp (University of North Carolina), and John Hennessy (Stanford University). Much of the discussion regarding IE follows along the lines of the Council of Graduate Schools' (2007) comments on IE in the report *Graduate Education: The Backbone of American Competitiveness and Innovation*:

A heightened commitment to socially relevant research may even improve the quality of graduate learning. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I will learn."

One model for advancing socially relevant research is the intellectual entrepreneurship (IE) program pioneered at The University of Texas at Austin. Students in the program are educated to become citizen scholars by using their skills and knowledge in a real-world setting and preparing for a career in all sectors of the economy. This program differs from typical community outreach and professional development initiatives in that it emphasizes cross-disciplinary scholarship and learning. The success of the IE program at the Austin campus derives from a critical group of faculty members who view themselves as citizen scholars—researchers who break the traditional boundaries between disciplines as well as between theoretical knowledge and the broader world. (pp. 10–11)

IE was launched in the graduate school at The University of Texas at Austin in 1996, and since 2003 nearly 1,000 undergraduate students have earned credit in its Pre-Graduate School Internship. The IE Pre-Graduate School Internship is a manifestation of the IE philosophy, facilitating partnerships between individual graduate students and undergraduates who aspire to attend graduate school (many of whom are from underrepresented populations) in order to affect institutional change for the benefit of both students and society. Approximately 60 percent of the interns are from underrepresented minority groups and/or are first-generation collegians. Over half of the former interns have gone on to graduate school.

The objective of the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship is to connect undergraduates with faculty and graduate students in the student's intended field of graduate study. Participants work with their mentors to create an internship aimed at exploring their chosen field, and mentors are responsible for developing a strategy for exposing students to relevant activities and experiences. Interns learn about the unique aspects of graduate study and engage in a wide range of activities, including the completion of scholarly research, writing for scholarly audiences, and participating in seminars. The IE Pre-Graduate School Internship is truly entrepreneurial in nature—no activities are prescribed or required; rather, interns and mentors collaboratively create the internship content (The University of Texas at Austin 2010).

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Given the interest in and dynamic nature of IE, it is important to investigate the experiences of participants. While one might immediately turn his or her attention to students and consider the ways in which IE facilitates their learning, it is also important to understand the experiences of mentors—specifically, the graduate students who in many ways are responsible for the success of IE. While developmental relationships between graduate and undergraduate students are not necessarily uncommon, the extant literature on mentoring in higher education largely addresses relationships between students and faculty, leaving the experiences and perspectives of graduate student mentors unacknowledged. In many ways, graduate students may actually be more accessible mentors than faculty, often having greater time, availability, and flexibility in their schedules (Dolan and Johnson 2009; Pfund et al. 2006). Indeed, Dolan and Johnson suggest that given their availability and proximity in age, it is important to consider whether graduate students might actually be in a better position to provide students with instruction on the craft of research or offer early exposure to academic life.

In addition to suggesting that graduate students can be an important source of mentorship for undergraduates, there is an emerging literature that suggests these mentors also have the ability to benefit reciprocally from the relationships they form. This research is largely exploratory, however, and more work is needed that illuminates the experiences of graduate students as they engage in mentoring relationships as mentors, rather than simply identifying the benefits they reap as protégés when working with faculty. Our work specifically addresses this limitation in the literature by analyzing graduate-student mentors' narratives to uncover the personal and professional benefits they identify as resulting from their mentoring relationships with undergraduates.

Our Approach

The participants in our study were students in the graduate school at UT-Austin, one of the largest (11,000 students) and most diverse public graduate schools in the United States. Mentors were asked to provide a written reflection on their experiences, and written narratives were collected from 2007 to 2010 from 81 graduate students who served as IE Pre-Graduate School Internship mentors (roughly half of the mentors who participated between 2007 and 2010). The participants ranged in age from their early 20s to 40s

and consisted of 25 men and 56 women representing a wide range of academic disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, liberal arts, applied sciences, fine arts, area studies, and professional schools). Forty participants were doctoral students, 31 were master's students, and nine were pursuing professional degrees. Additionally, the sample was ethnically diverse (45 White, 11 Latina/o, 10 Black, 11 Asian, and four uncategorized).

The research team analyzed mentor reflections and coded the narratives, developing themes articulated by mentors regarding the benefits to them of participating in the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship. The team then discussed excerpts from the narratives that best expressed the identified themes, some of which are shared below. The team chose to not use participants' actual names, opting for pseudonyms and referring only to their general field of study in the final write-up. While we acknowledge that the pool of participants may have been inclined to report favorably on their experiences in IE both because the narratives were posted on a website and because they perhaps viewed mentoring favorably before their experience, analyzing mentor reflections provides insight into the potential benefits accrued through the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship.

Study Findings

While some acknowledged that these relationships required a significant time commitment, mentors largely used their narratives to discuss the benefits of serving in this role. Mentors described their relationships as holding four main types of benefits. First, mentoring offered mentors a deeper understanding both of themselves and their academic discipline. Second, mentorship offered an opportunity to develop needed advising and mentoring skills essential for success in their future careers. Third, participants felt they could contribute to the diversity of their field by mentoring a scholar from an underrepresented population. Finally, mentoring heightened awareness of the reciprocal nature of developmental relationships. In other words, serving as someone's mentor allowed graduate students to indirectly repay their mentors for their help and guidance or to model the experiences they felt were important for all protégés to have. Examples of these thematic findings follow.

Deeper perspectives on self and discipline. Mentorship provided graduate students with a greater understanding of both themselves and their discipline. Working with a new

scholar gave mentors insight into the workings of their field, as Veronica, a natural sciences doctoral student, noted:

[Mentoring] gave me an opportunity to function as a mentor like the kind I had ... one where the mentor fosters a relationship with an undergrad to *demystify the world of graduate school*, answering any and all questions about the graduate process and offering pointers for how to open new doors in the beginnings of his/her research career.
[Emphasis added]

Through her mentoring, Veronica came to understand the value of “hidden” information and realized the importance of sharing it with her mentee. Hermione, a humanities graduate student, similarly noted that her mentorship allowed her mentee to “see details of graduate life that may not have been understood any other way.” The process of communicating expectations and norms gave mentors an enhanced understanding of the knowledge hidden from, and perhaps inaccessible to, first-generation and/or underrepresented students. This was the motivation for Eva, a first-generation graduate student in education, to serve as a pre-graduate mentor; she noted that she struggled “to figure out my place among so many others who seemed to be privy to the unspoken rules of the academy long before stepping foot on campus.” By providing this information to their mentees, graduate students helped bridge the gap between the espoused knowledge of their disciplines and departments and the often veiled networks and sources that could enhance their own pathways to a graduate degree.

Mentors reflected on their individual journeys to graduate school as they supported their mentees, bringing their own challenges and victories to light. Mentors often approached their relationship expecting to provide direction to their mentees, only to learn that the relationship provided insights into their own career paths. “I found myself explaining the process of pursuing a graduate degree rather than teaching new techniques,” wrote Ingrid, a natural sciences doctoral student. “This was helpful to me because it made me think about my own process and gave me insight into why I chose this path for myself.” Dean, a liberal arts graduate student, noted that his mentee’s development challenged him to think about his own trajectory in his graduate studies. Dean’s reexamination of his path through the experience of being a mentor gave

him the opportunity to “solidify the choices I have made or propel me to make appropriate adjustments to my graduate career,” an opportunity for which he expressed “sincere appreciation.” Thus, being a mentor allowed Dean to reflect on his own goals and reassess whether his choices were consistent with the experience he wants to have in graduate school.

In addition to clarifying their internal motivations and goals, sometimes mentoring could clarify mentors’ understanding of their own area of study. Echoing the adage stating that the best way to truly understand something is to teach it to someone else, Mark, a doctoral student in engineering, stated:

For graduate students, there is no better way to really learn material than by having to teach the information yourself ... I profited greatly in both my mentoring skills and my understanding of my research by explaining the details to someone else on a daily basis.

Thus, instructing a mentee provided Mark and others with an opportunity to review critical information and practice transmitting that knowledge to others.

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Developing needed advising skills essential for future careers. While re-learning principles important within their fields, IE mentors were simultaneously able to develop their pedagogical skills. This finding is consistent with a larger theme: participants often discussed how mentoring gave them necessary skills for their future professions, especially for those aspiring to faculty roles. This was often surprising for mentors, as doctoral student Sarah’s narrative revealed:

I was not expecting ... that I would have learned so much throughout the process. The IE Pre-Grad Internship allows a graduate student mentor to play the role that a tenure-track professor might assume.

Importantly, narratives revealed that mentors accrued valuable experiences by working closely with students in ways that were not always otherwise available in their

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graduate programs. Susanne, a liberal arts doctoral student, noted that “mentoring and training a promising student in a one-to-one capacity” was a needed competency in her field, stating, “the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program has been nearly perfect in filling that gap.”

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Working with an emerging scholar allowed mentors to actively engage a student with the goal of promoting learning and development. This provided them with opportunities to practice setting high standards while simultaneously providing support, mirroring the processes they anticipated using in the future. Some also described having to manage the tension between providing a rigorous, realistic view of graduate study while simultaneously increasing their mentee's confidence—an opportunity for mentors to practice “soft skills.” Carmen, a humanities doctoral student, noted that “by assigning regular essay projects, critiquing my mentee's work, and offering opinions and suggestions, I now have a taste of what it feels like to be a ‘real’ professor.” Marjorie, a doctoral student in a professional school, stated, “I thought it was important to discuss with [my mentee] issues concerning confidence and self-efficacy,” along with advice about research and potential graduate options. Thus, Marjorie was able to offer her mentee the support and confidence she deemed necessary for success while simultaneously providing helpful information.

While most participants linked their mentoring to the support a professor might provide, they also shared that these skills are transferrable to other careers. Kim, an engineering doctoral student, connected his mentoring with broader skill development, noting that “guiding a student to the right path” provided “knowledge of how to become a good leader.” Even if mentors did not aspire to be professors, they were able to develop transferrable leadership and supervisory skills important for success in many professions.

An opportunity to contribute to diversity in academia through mentorship. Many participants articulated an indirect benefit associated with their participation in the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship, noting that their discipline generally would benefit from the contributions of their talented interns. Mentors shared how working with an

intern from an underrepresented population and encouraging his or her pursuit of an academic career would not only assist that student, but also would contribute to increased diversity in their respective fields. This was a particularly powerful realization for Mercedes, who shared the importance of working with a student of the same race and ethnicity:

Serving as a mentor to a first-generation college student and fellow Mexican-American through the IE program has been one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences I've had. In writing [my mentee's] syllabus, assisting him with the completion of his final research paper, taking him to his first national scholarly conference ... I too have honed my skills as the type of educator I hope to be My commitment as a scholar of color and responsibility to other similarly situated students has grown tenfold.

In addition to an opportunity to develop professorial skills, Mercedes saw her relationship with her intern as significant because of their shared ethnic identity and the opportunity this relationship provided her to re-affirm her commitment to diversity. Thus, serving as an IE mentor allowed students like Mercedes to fulfill a cultural commitment by reaching out to students from underrepresented groups, fostering their achievement, and encouraging their entry into graduate education.

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Furthermore, working with interns from underserved groups and engaging in conversations about race and marginality not only provided insights to which some mentors had not previously been exposed—but also demonstrated how feelings of inadequacy are universal among all students and how supportive mentorship can alleviate these concerns. Daniella, a biology doctoral student, discussed the linkages she shared with her mentee, Francis:

Francis and I come from different backgrounds, but we have a lot in common. Both of us share an interest in science. When I arrived as a freshman,

I too questioned my ability and whether I was UT material. Francis wasn't alone in having doubts.

Mentors shared how such interactions moved the discussion about diversity from the abstract to the concrete. In working with an underrepresented student, mentors worked to bring new perspectives to their discipline, engaging new modes of inquiry in their fields.

Awareness of the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships. The last theme reflected the symbiotic nature of the mentoring relationship, although the reciprocity was more indirect. Many mentors shared that they engaged in their work because they had received guidance and wanted to contribute to another generation. Bella, a library science graduate student, related her commitment to helping her student in ways in which she had been mentored:

I see this reciprocity—mentor and mentee challenging each other—as the essence of the mentorship experience. I've been fortunate to have good mentors in my life who continue to guide and support me ... I take very seriously my responsibility to offer similar support to other people, regardless of age.

Bella perceived her mentoring as fulfilling an obligation to those who had mentored her. Strong mentoring begets stronger mentoring, as Bella reflected, and mentors were intent on ensuring that their mentees benefited from this advantage in their own academic careers.

Conversely, there were some cases in which mentors did not receive appropriate mentoring themselves and therefore approached their mentoring as a way to ensure that future generations had a more positive experience than they did. Jameela, a doctoral student in liberal arts, discussed how her past experiences influenced her mentoring:

I did not have a mentor when I was an undergraduate ... it was not always easy to feel included. I tried to think of all the questions I had myself as an undergrad and never had answered ... I always remembered what I had lacked in terms of support and encouragement.

These individuals desired to break the cycle of poor guidance and to foster positive relationships for the future, in contrast to those mentors who had benefited from positive mentorship and wished to pass along those experiences to others.

Conclusions and Implications

Mentoring goes beyond offering information, support, and resources to mentees. Based on our analysis, it appears to be related to positive outcomes for mentors as well. Graduate-student mentors in the UT-Austin IE Pre-Graduate School Internship clearly articulated significant personal and professional benefits reaped from the relationships they formed with their interns. Echoing Dolan and Johnson's (2009) findings on mentoring in business, IE mentors revealed positive emotions that emerged from their relationships with their mentees. However, rather than simply focusing on social support, IE Pre-Graduate School Internship mentors most appreciated how working with an intern provided insight into their personal journey through academia and prepared them for the path that lies ahead.

Interestingly, graduate mentors identified two personal outcomes associated with developmental relationships that went beyond what they received in terms of resources. First, mentors explained that their mentoring "paid forward" the benefits many had received as mentees. Graduate students acknowledged the value of their developmental relationships with past mentors and saw a responsibility to advise a new generation. The second, somewhat "indirect" benefit was mentors' contribution to diversity in higher education, given the high number of underrepresented students within the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship. Mentors acknowledged that encouraging these students to pursue graduate school could ultimately increase the diversity of their fields.

In their reflections, we see how IE Pre-Graduate School Internship mentors have responded to the national call to mentor articulated by President Obama and others. The findings suggest that these burgeoning academics see themselves as "citizen-scholars," combining their strengths with those of community partners to jointly accomplish societal objectives. Mentors shared writing, presenting, teaching, and research opportunities with interns, accruing professional competencies while helping emerging scholars achieve their own goals of reaching graduate school. As many participants in this study aspired to the professoriate, it is important to connect the experiences they shared and the benefits they received in relation to their academic socialization—an area that recent scholarship has critiqued as lacking in graduate programs. Given the challenges for young faculty in balancing support for students with their own need for advancement (Tierney and Bensimon 1996), it may be particularly important for graduate students to

learn how to mentor and advise in ways that are beneficial for students but not personally detrimental. Additionally, mentors either advanced their passion to racially and ethnically diversify their respective fields or learned of the need for diversity in academia. Thus, in addition to demonstrating citizen-scholarship to undergraduates as mentors, it appears that the graduate students in the sample were also being socialized to use their intellectual capabilities for the good of others—suggesting that IE served as a vehicle to provide graduate students with the opportunity to merge scholarship and civic engagement. Having impactful, positive experiences sets a tone for the mentors in their next stages of life, and their purposive involvement with their interns gives the next generation of graduate students role models so that they, too, might serve as mentors.

Institutional leaders have the opportunity to greatly influence the development of the next generation of academics. Embracing interdisciplinary approaches to graduate education, encouraging graduate students to not only hone their research skills but also their pedagogical and advising competencies, and adding their voices to the increasing number of advocates of citizen-scholarship are some ways in which leaders can advance philosophies such as IE to assist graduate students, undergraduates, academe writ large, and, ultimately, society. The benefits mentorship offers suggest that graduate students should be encouraged to participate in these relationships not only as a means toward personal fulfillment, but also as a means to develop the skills for both academic and non-academic careers. Thus, as program directors develop undergraduate mentoring programs, they can recruit graduate students to mentorship roles by highlighting the development that emerges in these experiences. Further, graduate programs should consider institutionalizing efforts that expose graduate students to mentoring by providing opportunities to mentor undergraduates with sufficient support to facilitate student learning and development. Such actions can reify President Obama's observation that senior partners, such as graduate students, do indeed benefit equally from mentoring relationships. ❧

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